

Defining "Groove"

By Charles Keil

*The brain within its groove
Runs evenly and true;
But let a splinter swerve,
'T were easier for you
To put the water back
When floods have slit the hills,
And scooped a turnpike for themselves,
And blotted out the mills!*

Emily Dickinson

For who would teach rhythm to the world of machines and guns?

Leopold Senghor

The word groove is not yet fully established in the dictionaries and thesauri of the world as a synonym for "swing," "flow," "focus," "grace," or "being in the zone," "being in the pocket." Yet, starting with the old meaning of groove as "channel," Emily Dickinson in her 19th Century poem prefigures these current meanings as well as the famous butterfly that causes a hurricane in chaos theory; her "splinter swerve" is certainly a "difference that makes a difference" (Bateson), a "discrepancy" that turns flow to flood and creates a thruway for the mind to blot out the mills, machines and guns of civilization.

We use this word/concept "groove" because it is used in common parlance to name the broad range of phenomena we want to understand well enough to foster. "Entrainment" is a technical term from physics favored by some ethnomusicologists who may be uncomfortable using African-American slang, but why burden an organic life process with a physical

mechanical model? "Let's entrain." "That band is really entraining." Just doesn't sound right (unless, perhaps, you have „Trane" as in Coltrane in mind). Steven Feld's (1994) formulation "in synch but slightly out of phase" is a more precise technical definition of entrainment as groove (see below) but why use seven or nine words -- entrainment as in synch but slightly out of phase – when one will do? "Being in the zone" is more of a sports metaphor, a four word phrase, and as a verb gives me "to zone" (establishing rules about space according to town regulations) and the phrase "to zone out" which is more like the opposite of "being in the groove." "Let's zone" doesn't work either. "Flow" works well enough as a substitute for "groove" as both noun and verb, but may be too broad and is not as suggestive of social interaction. "Swing" also works as noun or verb and always brings up the core groovology axiom, "It don't mean a thing, if it ain't got that swing." Historically, the "swing" word/concept is there before "groove," but it denotes "swing era," "swing music," "swing revival" for some people and has picked up some strong promiscuity connotations since the 1970s. I know I'd rather be called a groover than a "swinger."

Over the years I've used the phrases "vital drive" or "time feel" or "in the pocket" for the nouns "groove" or "swing," and verb equivalents can include "to push," "to cook," "to lock up" or "interlock," "to take it higher," "to get down," "to funk it up," "to get down on it," etc. but it has become clear to me, at least, that while we may not agree on the direction (up or down) a groove is taking us, there is some kind of consensus out there that, as Gertrude Stein might have put it, a groove is a groove is a groove. We know it when we are in it. There is some there there.

Since the 1950s I have been trying to figure out exactly how a groove is created or crafted by jazz drummers and bassists. I can't say that I have gotten very far with this project in half a century, but, thanks primarily to Josef Prögler's measurements of my plucks on a bass and taps on a cymbal compared to the plucks and taps of other musicians (Ethnomusicology Vol 39, No. 1, 1995), I am gradually getting clearer about what I can't perceive and what I don't know. And, since "ignorance is bliss" when it comes to grooving, this not perceiving accurately and not knowing what I'm doing when I play music doesn't really bother or motivate me any more. Curiosity still motivates me. I'd like to know what children are doing as they learn to groove, I'd like to know what some of the great jazz and blues players are actually doing with time, and what they think they are doing. Do their thinkings and behaviors match up? Are they as ignorant as I am? So I continue to work with children, teaching them,

as best I can, to drum and dance and sing. And I continue to do interviews with musicians asking them "how do you create a groove?" or "where do you think the groove comes from?"

What do I think I know about all this today? A groove can happen whenever two or three different personal "time-feels" or "intrinsic motive pulses" (Trevarthen, 1999-2000) interact. Typically this could be a bassist and drummer in a jazz, rock, blues, or any "rhythm section" but it could also be one person, a drummer at a trapset whose feet and hands are generating "participatory discrepancies." The Participatory Discrepancies or PDs are measurable differences or discrepancies in attack points and release points along a time continuum. A bass player plucks a string at a particular point in time and may touch/muffle/stop a string before plucking it again; these startings and stoppings can be measured to the millisecond and compared with a metronome and/or a drummer's tap on a ride cymbal to say with some confidence that a particular pluck is consistently ahead of or behind the click of the metronome, ahead of or behind the drummer's tap. The drummer and bassist are consistently in synchrony with each other, but they are also consistently discrepant, different, slightly out of phase or in and out of phase with each other – the Feld formulation of human or interactive "entrainment" discussed above. Similarly, a drummer's right hand may be tapping ahead of the metronome or bass plucks while his left foot on the high hats is "laying back" or coming down on the 2 and 4 of the measure "late" in relation to ride cymbal and/or bass and/or a metronome. How "early" or "late"? 30 milliseconds? 45 milliseconds? We can make the measurements and know whose "time-feel" or "intrinsic motive pulse" is pushing the beat and whose is pulling back, or who might be a "pendulum player", to use one drummer's description of the person in a three person rhythm section who goes back and forth between the other two e.g. Jimmy Cobb the drummer aligning his time-feel with pianist Wynton Kelly and then aligning it with Paul Chambers the bassist, from moment to moment. This mix of PDs may or may not actually be happening in Miles Davis' rhythm section on the Kinda Blue album (we can't yet make measurements from old recordings), but one drummer in Buffalo, N.Y. thinks that it is. What did Jimmy Cobb think he was doing? What did he actually do? How about the other two players? We don't know. And most people ignore or are ignorant about these matters. My only point here is that PDs exist, one player can generate them to create a groove, and two or more players are generating many, many PDs moment by moment in any cooking rhythm section or band.

Similarly, children learning to drum and dance and sing are generating PDs and grooves. Are we generating enough PDs? Do our individual "imps" mesh magically? Are the grooves getting better, stronger, from day to day and week to week? We don't need any scientific measurements to find out. Anyone can see the smile, feel the glow from a child who is "getting it" and "getting into the groove." And the energy in a group of children who are into a groove and feeling it can stimulate a lot of smiles and tears of happiness in adults who are lucky enough to witness it.

Pat Campbell¹:

"Groovy" was corny soon after it was coined in the late 1960s, but groove has returned (with the "y" missing) to establish itself as musicking in tune and in time. Perhaps not precisely that, because a groove allows singers, players, and dancers the permission, the leeway, to be personally expressive within the framework. All too rarely does school music hit its stride, developing a groove the children want and need. All too often it's back to perfectionism and 'the standards' that preclude the possibility of "being in the zone," being open to powerful collective action with room for personal twists in which growing mutuality makes the groove better and better.

Of course, at first glance, teachers might wonder whether the music they hear every day in their classrooms is all about participatory discrepancies, very pronounced discrepancies too far from the focus, too widely spread: choir children singing off-key, band kids playing out of time, violins screeching way too far out of tune. But can children get the groove? You bet. It is that happy combination of getting skilled on the instrument (or voice), then letting go, loosening up, listening forward. Not an easy concept for teachers whose schools strive for quiet, cooperative kids, uniformity and conformity of behavior. But what a powerful feeling it is when that careful play of an agreed-upon group sound is enhanced with allowances for the give-and-take of personal expression.

¹ Pat Campbell works with Charles Keil in the M.U.S.E Project and has co-written his book: *Born to Groove*, from which this chapter (23) is taken.

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